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AUTHOR Mitchell, Claudia
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ABSTRACT

Some bases of intra-group identification among Black people who inhabit urban ghettoes are discussed, as well as the economy of the ghetto, especially as it pertains to the strategies that Black Americans have evolved to deal with their subsistence problems. An attempt is made to relate these strategies to the presence of in-group schisms and to show how they serve to perpetuate intra-group divisiveness. It is suggested that participation in a common cultural heritage, particularly in the area of speech behavior, serves to reaffirm and dramatize solidarity in the face of divisive forces. Some features and usage conventions of Black English are briefly considered. The study is based on field research conducted in West Oakland, California, during 1966-67. (CLK)

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SOME ASPECTS OF SOCIAL INTERACTION IN A BLACK URBAN COMMUNITY

Claudia Mitchell

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SOME ASPECTS OF SOCIAL INTERACTION IN A BLACK URBAN COMMUNITY

Claudia Mitchell
University of California, Berkeley

Prefatory note: The following is a transcript of a talk presented October 14, 1968 at the bi-weekly seminar of the Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley. It should be read as an informal presentation of work in preparation rather than a finished paper. Comments will be welcomed and appreciated.

This presentation is based on field research conducted in West Oakland, California, during 1966 and 1967. Most of the data discussed were collected after the official informant-investigator situation had given way to informal chats. Records of these chats were kept since they provided rich biographical information about informants. It turned out that there was much of interest in them in addition to the personal history data they contain.

Introduction

First of all, I would like to discuss some bases of intra-group identification among Black people who inhabit urban ghettoes. Secondly, I want to talk briefly about the economy of the ghetto, especially as it pertains to the strategies Black Americans have evolved to deal with their subsistence problems. I will attempt to relate these strategies to the presence of in-group schisms and to show how they serve to create persisting intra-group divisiveness. Thirdly, I want to show how participation in a common cultural heritage, particularly in the area of speech behavior serves to reaffirm and dramatize solidarity in the face of many divisive forces. In this section I will devote some attention to a few aspects of Black American speech behavior and conventions of usage.

1. Demographic statistics depict a rather homogeneous picture of Black urban communities: low per capita income, sub-standard housing, low status occupations and low level of educational attainment. In all of these areas Black urban communities are conspicuously different from the larger American community in this era of abundance. There are, however, some additional areas of homogeneity which rarely receive attention because of their ostensible lack of relation to the concerns of the wider community, these include dimensions along which heterogeneity exists which have far reaching implications for the group as a whole.

The means and modes of statisticians tend to mask the educational, economic and occupational differentiation present in the ghetto. An additional area of cleavage which cannot be overstressed as a basis for splits in the community might be labeled "life style." It is as important as any of the former for intra-cultural differentiation and definitions of in-group status to the extent that groups may be said to exist. I will have more on this point later.

The inhabitants of the ghetto see themselves alike in that they have had a common experience vis-a-vis the white world. They also feel that they share a common cultural heritage which involves certain kinds of preferences, such as in diet, entertainment, etc. In this second matter there is an awareness that differences in regional background do not make this true across the board.

Concerning the matter of the common experience it is treated as a truth which is for the most part unequivocal. I believe it is fair to say that the existence of an American Black man who has never been made to feel penalized on account of his racial membership would be disbelieved. Such a claim by a Black man would be believed to be based on ignorance, stupidity or insensitivity, and other Blacks would take pains to show him where he is wrong. At any rate, pick a Black man randomly and he can cite from his own experience examples of his being the victim of racial bigotry or overt, non-subtle racist practices. While agreeing that all Blacks suffer at the hands of whites, the issue of which whites, some whites or all whites remains controversial and unsettled. Are Southern whites most guilty or is the regional dimension fading in importance? Can it be settled by rural-urban, educated-uneducated or rich-poor distinctions? Blacks see trends, but feel

that racism cuts across all of these classifications.

The group then at the highest level is defined in opposition to another group and this forms a basis for intra-group identification and inter-group boundaries. Most recently, there has been a greater emphasis on the common cultural heritage aspect with a shift in underlining common descent from African ancestors, which stresses a shared cultural content. Perhaps the latter is becoming increasingly important as a result of acculturation and the upward mobility that some Blacks have achieved.

Many insights have been gained into the psychological ramifications of racial discrimination through the contributions of both social scientists and novelists. However, feelings of inferiority and self-hatred are not part and parcel of the Black man's self-image. The values of the majority have in some areas tended to be normative for this minority. As marginal men they have had a "bird's eye" view of the lack of consistency between the stated superordinate values of the wider culture and the behavior of its members. As the victims rather than the perpetrators of injustice their self-esteem is raised. They see aspects of their culture as humanistic in contrast to the commercialism that pervades the wider society. They take care of their aged rather than institutionalize them. They respect kinship ties and religious obligations. They are able to enjoy the simple things of life: singing, dancing and the fellowship of comrades while whites are involved in a never ending pursuit of money and material things. They emphasize their relative freedom as a people from ulcers and suicide and other things felt to be symptomatic of stress. To the extent that these things are visible in Black culture, they tend to be regarded as the product of acculturation.

One afternoon between appointments with informants I stopped in a neighborhood beauty shop to have my hair done. I went away impressed on two counts: first of all, the sheer amount of time that had been devoted to theories of Black behavior and theories of white behavior; secondly, I was impressed by what appeared to me to be a welter of remarks expressing Black chauvinism interspersed with an equally large number derogating Blacks. The following are excerpted from that day's field notes and other beauty shop conversations.

> The owner of the shop told me that she had just opened a few weeks before. I congratulated her and remarked that she must be proud to be opening a business of her own. She then went on to confide that she and her husband had once owned a grocery store but had gone out of business because Negroes would not give her their trade. She said, "One of the reasons that we can't get anywhere is because we won't stick together. A Black man would rather give his money to a white man than to another Black man any day," she continued. "That's why I decided to open this beauty shop because I know they have to come here to get their hair done. No white woman is going to do it for them." There were two other women in the shop, both of whom nodded their heads in confirmation. One woman noted that "no matter how much white people hate each other they will stick together so that you (meaning Black people) don't get anything."

This next conversation was also abstracted from "beauty-shop talk" and took place at the time when there was a great deal of attention being paid to the Manchester book in the newspapers and is one woman's interpretation of the situation.

> "Jackie and Robert Kennedy don't want that book published because it gives some clues about who really killed JFK and they want to spring that news when it's politically advantageous and get Bobby elected on the strength of that. Now, if that had been a Black man and his brother got killed, he would have told it so long ago that we would have forgotten it by now, regardless of the consequences." One woman disagreed and said she didn't think anyone capable of such base motives. The other woman replied, "Honey, you don't know white people, do you? Take the Kennedys, for example, and I love them as much as the rest of you, but the truth is the truth. They've got everything in the world that anybody could want. But do you think they're satisfied? No, they want power too and they'll do anything to get it. Look at Grace Kelly. Now she was rich, beautiful and a movie star. But she had to get to be a queen and personally I don't believe she's happy over there anyway, so far away from home. But white people just have to keep striving and the minute they get one thing they've got to find something else to want."

Two other women present in the shop narrated the following events:

> I was sitting in the back of the bus going to work one day and it was real crowded. A white woman walked back there and was standing up. A white man was sitting across the aisle from a Negro man and they were the only two men back there. So this white man says to the Negro man, "Why don't you get up and give that woman a seat?" I said to myself, Uh-oh, this white man has

messed with the wrong Negro. I could look at that Negro and tell that he wasn't taking nothing off nobody. So this Black man gets up and says to the white woman, just as polite, "Take my seat, Madam." And then he sat right down in the middle of the white man's lap and pulled a knife on him. That white man was scared to death and he sat there holding that Negro until he got off at his stop. (Peals of laughter) I wondered if that white man had missed his stop. (More laughter) I was tickled to death and so was that white woman but she kept looking down trying to hide it. Now you see, that's the way they are. He wasn't satisfied that we were sitting in the back of the bus. He had to go and try to make that Negro stand up. (Laughter) But what he didn't know was that that Negro had an equalizer and wasn't scared to use it. (Laughter) A lot of people think that this is the kind of thing that happens down South but it's the same up here.

When I was living in Kansas my town got struck by a tornado. The Negro section of town was in the middle surrounded by whites on all sides. The tornado struck one side of town and tore down all of the houses in its path and when it got to the Negro section it turned and didn't hit a single house where a Negro was living. It then resumed the original path it was traveling and continued to destroy white owned homes. She said, if that tornado hadn't turned the first time it would have hit and killed a many of Black men because the houses we were living in could have been blown down by the wolf. Till I die, she said, I will believe that that was the doing of the Lord, paying them back for all the suffering they have caused us, cause there were really some terrible white people in that town. One of the other women said, "Aaw, girl" and she replied that that was the natural truth and I'm telling it just the way it happened. If that tornado hadn't turned the second time it would have gone on out of town. But instead it had turned to continue its destruction of white homes. There were seventeen white people killed and not a single Negro was even hurt and I believe that there is somebody to thank for that and I figure it must be the Lord.

Just about this time another woman came in to report a tragedy had occurred just a few blocks away. A woman had been killed by her husband. Everyone was saddened because she had left a number of children. One of the women remarked that she wondered if the day would ever come when we would stop cutting and shooting each other. She said, "Sometimes I really can't blame the white man for not wanting us to live next door to him."

The point that I am trying to make here is not merely that Blacks as well as Whites are rather misinformed about each other as a result of lack of contact, although I believe that to be the case. Rather, I am trying to illustrate the folk conception of their group charter, that is, who "we" are as opposed to who "they" are. I chose these particular excerpts because they reflect both ethnocentrism and negative attitudes toward the in-group and because they provide illustrations of the kinds of things which underlie Black "togetherness" and "separateness."

2. I don't want to get into a detailed discussion of the economy of the ghetto since there is not much news in the fact that the ghetto is not self-sufficient economically. My concern with economics is motivated by what I feel is its importance in explaining the existence of intra-group schisms and therefore social interaction throughout the ghetto.

During World War II, discrimination in hiring practices was so widespread that its effects were being felt by the community at large. Not only was there talent being wasted but there was an actual labor shortage and as a result the FEPC came into being. The problem is not close to being solved. All things being equal the Black man has not been able to compete with the white for jobs.

I would like to avoid at this point a discussion of the details of lack of opportunity, lack of training and lack of educational achievement. My point is, that there is a scarcity of certain valued things in the ghetto: money, good housing and a means of raising one's status have been in limited supply. These things exist as "limited goods" over which there is much intra-cultural competition and conflict. To further complicate matters strong attitudes and values surround the different strategies Black people have utilized to achieve upward mobility and the benefits it entails. Moreover, what I have chosen to call "upward mobility" is itself subject to different definitions which again have strong valuations attached to them.

Given an environmental constant--the white world which controls the desired ends and which is apt to withhold them--what can be done to exploit the environment with the available technology?

There are three basic strategies which I believe to be operating. I differentiate them according to their prevailing emphasis: the Protestant-ethic strategy, the Secret-society or Middle-range strategy, and the Slick strategy.

The Protestant-ethic strategy is characterized by an emphasis on hard work, piety, legality, education, self-discipline, honesty, conventional family life and the maintenance of conjugal bonds. The Slick strategy emphasizes having an understanding of the social system in order to manipulate it to our own advantage. This requires considerable insight into the psychology of individuals in order to manipulate them. The Secret-society strategy is characterized by an emphasis on the maintenance of the outward appearance of respectability by mainstream standards and borrows tactics from either of the other two strategies when it is expedient to do so.

The Protestant-ethic and Secret-society strategies are learned primarily in the home; the Slick strategy is the product of the streets. These three strategies co-exist but not comfortably. The Protestant-ethic and Slick strategies have almost nothing in common but there is rapproachement between the Secret-society strategy and each of the other two. The user of one strategy may see the employment of a conflicting strategy by other Blacks as threatening. For example, he may fear that Whites will consider all Blacks as charlatans on the one hand or (Uncle) Toms on the other.

These strategies are abstractions and for the most part are not reflected in the behavior pattern of any of my individual informants in a perfectly consistent way. The Protestant-ethic and Slick strategies do have some status as folk categories in that individuals tend to idealize their behavior as if it belonged to the former category and evaluate the behavior of others as if it belonged to the latter. I will give a brief sketch of three informants whose prevailing orientation exemplifies each of these three strategies.

> Shirley, mother of six, employed as a practical nurse, husband a laborer. From all outward indications she was attempting to rear her children according to all of the mainstream standards of respectability. None of her family ever missed church on Sunday. Both she and her husband were actively involved in church affairs. These activities constituted a major part of her social

life. Her children were supervised very carefully and I believed encouraged to play with each other rather than the neighborhood children. Her home was always immaculate as were her children.

Jean, the mother of three by two husbands. She actively tried to maintain the outward appearance of respectability. She was dissatisfied with her present husband and actively in pursuit of an individual whom she felt could provide her with the things she wanted. Considering the extra-marital affair very discrete she confided it to me only after preparing me in a number of ways. She tried to establish her social distance from her present husband; he was uneducated whereas she had been to college; he was satisfied with his present low status while she was very ambitious. She brought up her children to be respectable by instruction rather than example. Jean bought many of her clothes from shoplifters whom she looked down on but was not above using.

Thelma, one child, marital status unknown. The first time I was in her home there were a number of dresses clearly visible from where I was sitting with the price tags still on them. When she realized that they had caught my eye she explained that she did alterations to increase her income. I smiled and she laughed and asked me if I wanted to try anything on. I told her the clothes looked too expensive for my pocketbook. When I returned several weeks later for my first visit with her child she had moved. I was very disappointed because she had been open, friendly, intelligent and aware. Referring euphemistically to herself as a business woman, she noted that her neighbors looked down on her but found great amusement in the fact that many were not at all averse to being her customers. She said if she ever got in trouble with the law she would explain that she was not greedy and that she had cost the taxpayers less by using her wits to survive rather than by being on welfare roles. You can tell by the way I'm living, she said, that I'm not getting rich.

3.1 I would like to turn now to speech behavior and try to show how it, in many ways, can be seen as a reflection of the patterns and principles discussed earlier.

There is a deep involvement with people and the inlife histories in the ghetto. One important aspect of being able to manipulate one's environment is to be able to evaluate and measure people, to look beneath their front stage behavior and form hypotheses about their motivations and desires without giving oneself away. This involvement is manifested in speech behavior in a number of ways. Reports about events involve not only a description of what happened but what was said and the way it was said. Reporting about events often involves a unique way of quoting others. It may have any of the following features: a perfect repetition of what was said in precisely the way it was said accompanied by an exact mimicry of all the paralinguistic features. Choosing this way of communicating indicates that the speaker felt that all of the available information was relevant for semantic decoding. The emphasis on exact replication of the paralinguistic features provides a metaphorical background which the speaker felt the hearer was able to interpret because of their common culture. Given a common understanding of the metaphors of that culture, this kind of quotation is a powerful device for reducing semantic ambiguity. It attempts to communicate not only what the speaker said, but his intent and something about his background. There is a folk category for this kind of quotation and it is called marking someone. This exists as a highly developed skill in the repertoires of some individuals and is used not only for purposes of communication but also to entertain people. Another way of quoting others along these same lines is to achieve the same kind of semantic disambiguation by using hyperbole or exaggerated and affected speech styles to offer implicitly wry comment on the speakers background, personality, or intent.

The example which follows illustrates this latter style and is taken from a conversation with some Black people in Chicago. These individuals had recently attended the convention of a large corporation and had been a part of a group which had been meeting prior to the convention to develop some strategy for putting pressure on the corporation to hire more Blacks in executive positions. They had planned to bring the matter up in a general

meeting of delegates but before they had a chance another Black company man spoke before the entire body. One of the interlocutors said, "After he spoke our whole strategy was undermined. There was no way to get around his impact on the whites." I asked what this man had said.

Rose: (Drawling) He said, Ah am so-o-o happy to be here today. First of all Ah want to thank all you good white folks for creating so many opportunities for us niggers and ya'll can be sho that as soon as we can git ourselves qualified we gon be filing our applications. Ya'll done done what we been waiting for for a long time. Ya'll done give a colored man a good job with the company. (Laughter)

Claudia: Did he really say that?

Sue: Um-hm, yes he said it. Girl, where have you been? (Putting me down by intimating that I was not interpreting as I should)

Claudia: Yeah, I understand. But what did he really say?

Ernie: He said, "This is a moment of great personal pride for me. My very presence here is a tribute to the effectiveness of the civil rights movement. We now have ample evidence of the good faith of the company and we must now begin to prepare ourselves to handle more responsible positions. This is a major step forward on the part of the company. The next step is up to us." In other words, he said just what Rose said he said. He sold us out by accepting that kind of tokenism.

The next example comes from one of my Oakland informants who had a slight feud going with one of her neighbors. Both women had had several children out of wedlock although one was now married. They were living in extremely poverty stricken circumstances and both were extremely preoccupied with finding a way out of their present conditions. Jean quoted her neighbor in attempting to explain the underlying basis of the feud. She said, "I was talking to Pearl the other day and she said (the following was delivered in a style carefully articulated in order to depict the individual quoted as 'putting on the dog' and the gestures which accompanied it were so affected that Pearl is rendered a preposturously affected person) "You know, my family

owns their own home and I'm just living in this area temporarily because it is more beneficial to collect the rent from my own home and rent a less expensive apartment. All of my furniture is in storage because I wouldn't want to bring it into this neighborhood with all these thieves and hoodlums around." Jean said, "That's the kind of person she is and that's why I can't stand her."

The speech of Black people is not simply a dialect which differs from Huntley-Brinkley English phonologically, morphophonemically or syntactically. Nor is it merely a series of exotic codes such as the language of the "dozens" or the argots of certain kinds of hustlers. It is also a way of communicating metaphorically about a culture and a way of using language. It is an idiom of comaraderie that serves to reaffirm solidarity and its conventions reflect Black values, Black heritage and a shared experience.

The style of quoting discussed above may have its origin in the story telling genre. A good story teller has developed these skills to a point of expertise. I recall from my childhood a next door neighbor who used to keep many of the children in my neighborhood entertained for hours with his stories. The real magic was in his delivery, in his imitations of the speech of his characters and the voices of the animals. By manipulating styles, he communicated the motivating force behind each character's action and placed each character within our ken while fully utilizing the comic possibilities of these affectations.

The use of Black speech conventions is important for intra-cultural communication. Individuals vary in the presence of the strictly linguistic markers of "Black speech" in their idiolects. What is important is not that an individual know and utilize particular tense markers which do not exist in Standard English. Nor is command of the language of the dozens, sounding, signifying, marking, etc. the point at issue. What is important is the ability to understand and interpret the full range of speech forms with respect to social occasion and social and personal message. This involves being able to manipulate styles which reinforce a shared cultural identity and solidarity rather than knowing and using particular routines and expressions. Violation of the rules may create here, as elsewhere, ill will and unintelligibility.

4. The ghetto population defines itself in opposition to another group and bases its charter on claims to common ancestry and a common cultural heritage. The life style strategies employed by ghetto dwellers may be viewed as part of a technology to exploit the ghetto environment. These strategies emphasize general operating principles and particular tactics which clash by their very nature. If it is good to work hard and be honest it cannot also be good to get on welfare deceitfully or sell stolen goods for a living. As I mentioned earlier, any individual's behavior is typically a compromise and such behavior is subject to condemnation and criticism by one's neighbors and oneself. It creates divisiveness since one's neighbors see it as threatening to the group as a whole. Further schisms arise because individuals tend to use information about others to raise their own status. This is the principle of the "limited good" operating to maintain homogeneity.

The pluralist versus assimilation dimension enters as a result of the possibility of raising one's status by claiming to be more Black oriented in one's behavior and values. This emphasis tends to preserve continuity.

Finally, an important aspect of maintaining cultural integrity is the stress on participating in a common set of language usage conventions. It is important from an individual perspective because it helps to insure his in-group status. There is nothing new in that groups try to preserve their integrity. They must in some way remain viable.

5. From the point of view of collecting better ethnographies, there is little disagreement on the importance of attending not only to the facts but finding out what people think about them. An important means of achieving this end is to pay attention to what people say and the way they say it, including the appropriate linguistic responses in a given cultural context.

Humanistically, this presentation needs no defense. Anything which promotes understanding, intra- and inter-culturally, can serve to avoid further polarization. If we can equip ourselves to operate in a system by virtue of a better understanding of it, it alleviates our impulse to "throw out the baby with the bath." This brings to mind an incident which took place in a grade school several years ago. The teacher had instructed all of her pupils to memorize a poem to be delivered to the class. One little girl

chose a poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar which goes something like this:

> Lias! Lias!
> Bless de lawd
> Don't you know de days abroad
> If you don't git up, you scamp
> Dey'll be trouble in dis camp
> Think I'se gwine to let you sleep...

She delivered it however in the following style:

> Elias! Elias!
> Bless the Lord
> Don't you know the day is abroad
> If you don't get up, you scamp
> There will be trouble in this camp
> Do you think I'm going to let you sleep...

She did not get much farther than this in her recitation because many of the children (most of whom were Black) had heard it before and found her delivery hilarious. The teacher who was white could not understand the chaos which resulted from the recitation of this poem and inquired, "What is so funny?" One little girl, in the grip of mirth, volunteered, "You can't say that poem talking 'proper.' " The teacher continued, "If you children would spend your time cultivating good English you would have less time to make fun of others." The students went away accusing the teacher of being an 'old prejudiced Hunky' and the entire incident remained mysterious to the teacher. The most tragic figure in the entire episode was the little girl who chose to deliver an 'ethnic' poem in Standard English; she was accused of "always trying to be white."